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Van Cleave as SALT Negotiator?

The confidential recommendation to President-elect Reagan for "a pause" in new SALT talks, coupled with the possibility of defense strategist William Van Cleave's becoming Reagan's arms control negotiator, points to a decisive break with arms control philosophy that any SALT treaty is a good SALT treaty.

The unpublicized proposal for Reagan to go slow in new superpower nuclear arms talks came 10 days ago from the transition team turned lose on the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. Now required reading by Reagan's national security strategists, the report is described by those who have studied it as "exactly what the president-elect wants."

It espouses full linkage, advocates complete disclosure of widely alleged Soviet violations of past agreements and insists that the rebuilding of U.S. military strength to provide a "margin of safety" should precede a new SALT treaty.

That happens to coincide with arms control philosophies long held by Van Cleave, the brilliant iconoclast whose undiplomatic candor has cost him the Reagan administration posts he most wanted: the second or third top Pentagon job under Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger. During the presidential campaign, Van Cleave was Reagan's principal adviser on arms control, a policy area intimately known to the University of Southern California professor.

What Weinberger and other top-level Reaganites have found abrasive about Van Cleave both during the campaign and more recently in the post-election transition could be his greatest asset as chief American negotiator with stony-faced Soviet bargain-hunters in the Kremlin. "Bill as our nuclear arms negotiator," a Reagan insider privately remarked, "would be exactly right in sending Moscow the message that Reagan is one president who won't be rolled over on SALT."

Van Cleave was a member of the 1971-72 arms control negotiating team but resigned before the Nixon administration accepted and signed SALT I in Moscow in 1972. But in testimony before a Senate subcommittee headed by Sen. Henry Jackson, he warned that the treaty contained weaknesses that might prove dangerous in the future—a prophecy that has come all too true in the past eight years.

Van Cleave also served on Team B, the famous group of outside experts appointed in 1976 by then-Central Intelligence director George Bush as a check on the CIA's own expert assessment of U.S. and Soviet military strength.

Conceivably, Van Cleave, whose reputation for intellectual honesty emerged unscathed from his battles with Weinberger and other Reagan insiders, might decide that being chief arms control negotiator is a challenge not large enough for him. Reagan agents sounding him out on the prospect think he can be won over, mainly with the argument that no one else could have as much symbolic impact on Moscow.

An equal argument might be found in the strong tone of the ACDA transition team's report to the president-elect and the fact that it is having an enthusiastic reception by senior Reagan advisers. The team was headed by James Malone, ACDA's general counsel during the Nixon-Ford administration. Its central proposal: that until completion of a "thorough, interagency reassessment of all arms control and national security strategy . . . a pause in all arms control negotiations" is essential.

If, as expected, that becomes the president-elect's policy, the Reagan administration would follow an arms control strategy exactly opposite that of Jimmy Carter four years ago. Carter rushed into SALT talks with Moscow, but when he got an agreement 2½ years later, opposition ran so high that he did not even try to push it to a vote in the Senate.

Reagan's transition team warns against "unilateral arms reductions" by the United States in hope of enticing Soviet reciprocity. That is a deliberate reminder of the Alice-in-Wonderland arms control theory of the Carter administration during its blinkered days when Carter claimed the West no longer need have an "inordinate fear" of communism. The report's strongest argument for going slow is that SALT has become "a permanent excuse for Western failure to come to grips with the Soviet military challenge," a dictum Van Cleave himself might have written.

The shrewd move to confront the Soviets with the cold-steel will and determination of Bill Van Cleave as chief American SALT negotiator could help put arms control, which is clearly an important aspect of the superpower relationship, into proper perspective after 10 years of dangerous experimentation.

Senate critics who would try to shoot down Van Cleave would soon learn this fact: Reagan wants a new SALT treaty, but a treaty that is good, not bad or only fair, for the United States. With Van Cleave as his negotiator, he would not lose any sleep worrying.